LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CAREER RESILIENCE AMONG WOMEN PROFESSIONALS:

A STUDY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The workplace has become increasingly challenging for professionals to sustain meaningful and successful careers of their choice. These challenges get further exacerbated when one considers the careers of women professionals. As women progress in their careers, the demands on them increase professionally as well as personally. The expectation is that they remain invincible through exhibiting grit and resilience and sustain career focus. As a result of the multiplicity of roles that women are called to play, they struggle to cope with the often-conflicting demands. Deliberating on the small number of women who make it to top management positions, and the shrinking female talent pipeline, this study examines how women sustain themselves in their careers and persist through the challenges i.e. remain resilient. The research shifts attention away from the oft-studied issues of work-family interface and a gendered workplace that women confront. Instead, it investigates the phenomena of career resilience and how it manifests in the lives of senior women professionals with sustained corporate careers.

The study adopts a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology as a method focuses on studying consciousness by drawing directly from first-person point-of-view. It is a scientific process of systematic and explicit study of the participants own meaning-making of their lived experiences. The phenomenological interview is supported by the visual timeline mapping technique, which guides the narration of how the women make meaning of their lived experiences of career resilience as they progress through their career. The timeline mapping technique enhanced the richness of the details shared, assisted better recall of career events, and supported contextualization of the narratives shared, while chronologically capturing the participant's worldview of their professional careers.

Fourteen Indian working women with a minimum of 20 years of professional experience were enrolled for the study. The career journey of each participant was firstly ideographically analysed to identify themes and subthemes that pointed to career resilience as it was practiced. Aggregate cross-case identification of clusters and superordinate themes across the 14 participants led to an understanding of what it meant for these women to be career resilient.

The analysis led to the identification of 13 superordinate themes that manifested career resilience strategies, practices and resources that helped these women persist in their careers. Despite the many challenges they faced, they continued to reintegrate from disruptions and remain career resilient drawing from cognitive, emotional and physical forms of resilience. By seeking and creating new opportunities at work that strengthened their self-efficacy, they sustained and overcame challenges during both planned and unplanned disruption in their career and in their personal life. Together the cognitive nature of the protean self (Lifton, 1993) and the temporal attributes of Hall's (2002) protean career orientation enabled these women to nurture self-managed, flexible, adaptable, versatile, values-driven careers. This whole-life space perspective to their lifeworld bear evidence of high levels of self-driven employability enhancing strategies that helped them in not just sustaining their careers, but also in emerging as successful professionals in their chosen domains.

A key contribution of this study is the emergent career stages framework: The Build, Enrich and Optimize stages of their 20+ years of career was timelined to identify the 3 key stages. The corresponding cognitive, physical and emotional resources leveraged at each stage differs and career resilience evolves as the women become increasingly more resilient to optimize themselves as individuals and as professionals. The emergent career model suggests that women with sustained careers never really give up their career at any point,

they just stretch themselves and find ways to manage and to cope with the resources at their disposal and retain career focus. This study holds theoretical and practical implications for women professionals as well as organizations. The study will contribute to the limited literature on career resilience with specific reference to the workplace context and women professionals. It will enrich the knowledge on career resilience as a process rather than as a trait. The career strategies that nurture such career resilience and the sources of innate resilience too are supported which are essential for sustaining careers. The findings from the research are likely to help early-career, and mid-career women professionals prepare proactively and manage work-life to pursue sustained corporate careers. The *leaky female talent pipeline* and the *broken rung* can be addressed by organizations adopting career resilience nurturing strategies to retain and engage with the female employees they painstakingly hire into the workforce every year.